

## Here Comes Brand Commoditization

Call it heresy, but we think the marketing world is suffering from too much branding—too many marketers turning to the same process. It's a bit like the exodus of American businesses and families out of the cities. Good ideas, when practiced on a mass scale, often end up re-creating the problems they try to solve. A million people moving to cornfield sub-divisions, condo complexes and strip malls get the same crime, congestion and traffic they left in the city. So, too, marketers, in their flight from the world of look-alike products, have created a world of feel-alike brands.

Brand commoditization is the emotional sprawl we're carrying into the next century.

Let's back up a few years. Until ten or so years ago, marketing was pretty simple. We sold products by extolling their features. There had always been some feature that allowed claims like "faster," "safer," "easier," "brighter." But bottom-line-driven companies wanted growth, and they didn't want to pay for expensive product development. And the number of competitors kept growing and growing. It was just easier to copy each other's products than invest in real differences. Eventually, products became virtually interchangeable.

Enter "branding"—the new low-cost, high-yield solution. Branding meant "work the intangibles." If you dug into the emotions at play in product usage, you could claim the emotional end benefit. Your product would feel distinctive again. By switching from product promotion to branding, marketers saw their returns on investment rise after years of decline.

A decade of publicity has made branding the norm. Legions of account planners dug into user psychology and found big emotional issues to attach to their brands. Unfortunately, they all found, at the bottom of those deep wells, the same big issues. There was room, at first, for a few brands to claim their own emotional space. But the demands for growth, and the hunger to feed the bottom line rather than invest, have not abated. So marketers have found the same easy recourse: copy each other. Now, instead of blending features, we have products that blend emotions. What aspiring technology brand doesn't "feel innovative," "feel smart," "feel free," "feel in control"? It's no wonder that ad recall scores are off, direct response rates are declining and web banner click-through rates are dropping like stones. If we all use the same big cartoon emotions we can't help but all feel the same. Why should consumers pay attention if there is no difference?

So here we are, an industry whose best tool is now its undoing. We have product commoditization and brand commoditization. How do we get out of this mess?

Here's more heresy: We believe the solution won't be found by looking to the customer, but to the marketer, to his vision of the future—what's coming and how the company and its brands intend to serve that change. A company with a vision that is intriguing, perhaps provocative, is worth a second look. We call this Brand Point-of-View.

We think it's more than a way out of the brand commodity trap. We believe Brand Point-of-View works on many levels to forge a more powerful relationship—a relationship based on mutual interest, where rational interest and emotional appeal are equally powerful.

If you feel your brand may suffer from the emotional sprawl of brand commoditization, please call Beau Fraser, Managing Director of The Gate, at 212 508 3450.



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